



AOT in Action

Welcome to AOT in Action, your weekly e-newsletter from the Arizona Office of Tourism (AOT).

A Message from Director Sherry Henry:

Good afternoon,

During the hustle and bustle of the busy holiday season, I encourage you to take some time to enjoy the festive events and activities happening throughout the state!

Inspire your friends, family, out-of-town visitors and loved ones to experience some of Arizona's wonderful holiday happenings. Visit the Calendar of Events section on www.VisitArizona.com for ideas and details.

On behalf of AOT, we wish you a very happy holiday season!

Have a great week,

Sherry Henry
Director, Arizona Office of Tourism

AOT News

"Random Acts of Sunshine" Campaign Brightens Seattle

The Arizona Office of Tourism (AOT) "showered" the city of Seattle with Random Acts of Sunshine for a full week starting on Nov. 22, 2014. [Read Full Press Release.](#)

Seattle residents were treated to acts of kindness at high-traffic areas and events along with one of the city's most popular shopping centers, Pacific Place Mall. Selected at random, individuals were given gift cards to spend at the mall along with free coffee and Arizona-branded umbrellas. Everyone was encouraged to enter a sweepstakes and visit www.325daysofsun.com to learn more about Arizona as a travel destination. An eye-popping display of Arizona-branded red

umbrellas in Pacific Place Mall represented AOT “showering” the city with the acts of sunshine and kindness.

Brand ambassadors passed out 1,500 gift cards along with free coffee and Arizona Official State Visitor’s Guides while a bike brigade distributed Arizona-branded umbrellas throughout the city. Famously known for its high number of rainy days and very little sunshine year-round, Seattle is one of two target cities that AOT focused on to raise awareness of the state as a premier travel destination this winter. Seattle, along with Chicago, was identified this year for AOT’s annual target cities campaign, which focuses marketing efforts on major metropolitan destinations and promotes Arizona’s mild winter weather.

Arizona’s 2015 Travel Guide is now Available!

The Arizona Office of Tourism’s 2015 Arizona Official State Visitor’s Guide (OSVG), and accompanying Official State Visitor’s Map are now available for travelers wanting more information about Arizona as a vibrant leisure destination. [Read Full Press Release.](#)

Abundant with valuable Arizona tourist information from traveling tips to statewide accommodations, the guide is fully supported by advertising dollars and was produced with no direct costs to the agency’s budget. More than 450,000 copies have been published along with 510,000 accompanying comprehensive maps. Complimentary copies of the guides and maps will be distributed in response to the agency’s consumer advertising campaigns, queries into the Arizona travel call center as well as to travel industry partners and 62 visitor information centers located throughout the state including AOT’s Painted Cliffs Welcome Center.

The 2015 magazine-style guide features articles by Arizona-based writers on sports trivia countdown to Super Bowl XLIX; regional road trips that highlight the state’s diversity; how American Indian artists put a unique spin on traditional crafts; and a list of restaurants that are so good, you’ll want to take the recipes home with you.

To request a guide, visit www.VisitArizona.com. To download a digital version, visit www.nxtbook.com/nxtbooks/madden/az_ovg15/. If you would like to order copies of the guide for distribution, please contact Fulfillment and Visitor Services Manager Loretta Belonio at lbelonio@azot.gov.

Upcoming Events & Activities

[Los Angeles Media Marketplace](#)

Date: January 13, 2015

Location: Los Angeles, CA

[Travel Exchange-TREX15](#) (formerly National Tour Association Annual Convention)

Date: January 17-22, 2015

Location: New Orleans, LA

[Germany Media Mission](#)

Date: January 26-30, 2015

Locations: Cities TBD

Industry News

US Travel Industry Carefully Eyeing Cuba Tourism

Cuba was once a haven for sun-seeking American tourists. Beautiful beaches, lively casinos and late-night dancing made it the perfect getaway, only an hour's flight from Miami.

But the Cuban revolution led by Fidel Castro and the subsequent Cold War embargo of the communist island nation put an end to that.

President Barack Obama's announcement Wednesday of plans to re-establish diplomatic ties with Cuba doesn't suddenly lift the ban on U.S. tourism. It does, however, give hope to airlines, hotel chains and cruise companies – all which have been quietly eyeing a removal of the travel ban – that they soon will be able to bring U.S. tourists to the Caribbean nation.

"Cuba is the largest country in the Caribbean, so there's some exciting possibilities," said Roger Frizzell, spokesman for Carnival Corp. He said "some infrastructure for cruising already exists in the country," although other issues "need to be taken into consideration if this market opens up."

A handful of international companies already operate in Cuba. For instance, Spanish hotel chain Melia has 26 properties on the island. U.S. companies, like Hilton Worldwide and Marriott International – the two largest chains by rooms – say they welcome any future opportunities to include Cuba in their rapidly growing global footprint.

"We will take our cues from the U.S. government, but look forward to opening hotels in Cuba, as companies from other countries have done already," Marriott CEO Arne Sorenson said via an emailed statement.

While most Americans are prohibited from traveling to Cuba and spending money there, close relatives of Cubans, academics and people on accredited cultural education programs can visit. And there is a tiny, but robust business in transporting people to Cuba.

Most operators are tiny storefront travel agents in the Miami area with names like Alina's Travel Co. and Gina's Travel Services. Those agents then charter planes from carriers like American Airlines to transport the groups.

About 170,000 authorized travelers made the trip last year, according to the Department of Commerce.

"Once people get a glimpse of Cuba, they always want to see more," said Katharine Bonner, a senior executive at Connecticut-based tour operator Tauck, which runs tours there under a

cultural exchange license. "Americans are very curious about a country that is 90 miles off our coast but has been off limits for so long."

It is that isolation, in part, that is so appealing. There's no McDonalds, no Starbucks. Bonner said once travel opens, there will be a rush to see Cuba before its gets "Americanized."

"It's almost like a country that has been frozen in time," she said. "There's going to be a desire to see Cuba before it changes."

The challenge for the industry will be to offer trips to Cuba for eager tourists without alienating anti-Castro Cuban-Americans who stay in hotels or take cruises elsewhere. Regardless, for now, senior Obama administration officials say that travel to Cuba for tourist activities will remain prohibited.

U.S. airlines have been quietly dipping their toes in Cuba's warm waters for years.

American Airlines dominates many of the routes to Latin America with its hub in Miami. It's run charters to Cuba for more than 15 years, according to spokeswoman Martha Pantin. It now operates 20 weekly flights from Miami to Havana, Holguin, Santa Clara and Cienfuegos and from Tampa to Havana and Holguin.

JetBlue Airways started flying Cuba charters in September 2011. It's a very small part of the airline's business; just three weekly flights on Airbus A320s with 50 to 80 customers, either to Havana or Santa Clara.

CEO David Barger told The Associated Press last year that the charters are a way of "just understanding what happens, if in fact there's a normalization."

Delta Air Lines, which operated more than 240 charter flights between October 2011 and December 2012, said it has no immediate plans to fly to Cuba. But, spokesman Anthony Black noted that "having served there through our charter operations, the groundwork has been laid for us to possibly serve the market if an opportunity becomes available."

Airlines are granted the right to fly international routes through bilateral agreements between U.S. and foreign governments. A similar agreement would need to be reached with Cuba first. There is one dating back to 1953 – it was last updated on July 30, 1957 – that allows specific routes from New York, Washington D.C., Houston, New Orleans and the Florida cities of Miami, St. Petersburg, Tampa, Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach.

The one immediate change for licensed travelers: they will now be able to return to the U.S. with \$400 in Cuban goods, including tobacco and alcohol. Limited amounts of Cuban cigars might be the new hot souvenir. (*ABCNews.com, Dec. 17*)

Holiday Travel to Set National Record, AAA Says

An improving economy, sharply lower gas prices and the calendar will combine to make the year-end [holiday travel season the busiest on record](#) nationally, according to an annual forecast.

Auto-club giant AAA projects that nearly 99 million Americans will travel more than 50 miles by car or air, up 4% from 94.8 million a year ago and the highest since AAA began keeping records in 2001. The previous record was set last year.

"What we're seeing is people are more willing to travel, and they're not wanting to just stay home and worry about the economy," said Megan Saxon, AAA travel manager in Phoenix.

The lowest gas prices in five years are spurring more road trips; more than 9 in 10 who travel will go by car. The calendar also will boost holiday travel because Christmas and New Year's Day fall on Thursdays, making long-weekend getaways possible.

"At one time it was a decision between flying and driving, but ... people are just opting to drive their cars because the gas prices are so low," said Garrett Townsend with AAA Auto Club South.

He expects to see pump prices drop another 10 to 20 cents by Christmas Day. The national average price of a gallon of gas is \$2.55, 69 cents less than a year ago.

The federal government and some companies also are granting employees an extra paid day off Dec. 26.

"That nicely pairs in with the weekend," Saxon said, adding that many travelers will hit the road Dec 23.

The busiest day at airports will be Friday when many schools get out for the holiday break, according to Airlines for America. The least busy days? Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, New Year's Eve and New Year's Day.

Kelly Triplett and her husband will catch a flight from Phoenix to Spokane, Wash., Dec. 23 to visit family. Triplett bought the tickets a couple of months ago when she found fares below \$300 round trip.

Triplett, director of marketing for the Scottsdale Convention & Visitors Bureau, travels about 10 times a year for work and fun and has noticed bigger crowds at airports, on flights and in a variety of cities.

"I can't remember the last time there wasn't nearly every seat taken on an airplane," Triplett said. In New York for work this past weekend, she had a hard time finding a cab.

"The city was packed," she said. (*USAToday.com*, Dec. 16)

IHG Acquires Boutique Operator Kimpton Hotels

InterContinental Hotels Group has reached a deal to acquire boutique hotel operator Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants for \$430 million.

Kimpton has an asset-light business model, managing 62 hotels and 71 restaurants and bars.

It has a further 16 hotels in the pipeline.

Kimpton was founded in 1981, and claims to be the largest independent boutique hotel and restaurant business in the US.

Along with its own Hotel Indigo and EVEN Hotel brands, it gives IHG a major presence in the boutique/lifestyle market, with over 200 properties in this segment open or under development, IHG said.

"Kimpton is a well-established and highly successful business that has built an industry leading position in the US. It has created a portfolio of world-class hotels and destination restaurants, and the distinctive and innovative Kimpton brand will fit perfectly into the IHG brand family," IHG CEO Richard Solomons said in a statement.

Kimpton's COO Mike DeFrino will continue in his post, and the acquisition is expected to close in March 2015. (*TravelMole.com, Dec. 16*)

Calendar of Events

Visit www.VisitArizona.com to find information on all the exciting [events, festivals and activities](#) held throughout the Grand Canyon State!

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